

Dial Om for Murder

The Hare Krishna church, once brimming with youthful idealism, has become a haven for drug traffickers, suspected child molesters - and killers.

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Once a year, around the end of May, Lord Nrisingha, the Hindu warrior god, rises to drive out the demons that threaten the worshipers of Krishna. In the early morning hours of May 22nd, 1986 - the day before Nrisingha's coming - Steve Bryant parked on a deserted street in West Los Angeles. Bryant shut off the headlights of the 1976 Dodge van that was both his home and the field headquarters of his one-man holy war. He looked up the street and studied the rearview mirror. Then he folded his hands and tried to chant.

It was no good. The street was still, but his mind was racing. He tried to let it go blank, to give it all to Krishna. But the death mantra kept pounding away. "The gurus must die, the gurus must die."

Bryant was exhausted. For the last year, he had devoted his life to his war against the gurus who controlled the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). The battle had cost him his wife and his children. He had roamed the country telling Krishna devotees, cops, journalists, anyone who would listen, that the gurus had poisoned the religion to build empires. He said they tolerated child abuse and drug trafficking. The cops said prove it and shrugged him off. He predicted the gurus would kill him. Everybody laughed at him. Who would want to kill Steve Bryant? He was a flake, an itinerant trinket maker, a small-time schemer who drifted into drugs when his scams failed.

Sitting in the dark, Bryant once again vowed to kill Bhaktipada. Bhaktipada was the most powerful guru and the most evil. He should be the first to die. Bhaktipada's followers washed his feet at New Vrindaban, his 3000-acre kingdom high in the hills of West Virginia. They thought the ground he touched was holy and walked in his footsteps. And who was Bhaktipada? A

man who hated women. Bhaktipada said three things were better when you beat them: your drum, your dog, your wife.

A picture of the Palace of Gold, which Bhaktipada had built to honor Prabhupada, ISKCON's founder, flashed through Bryant's mind. What a perfect symbol of hypocrisy! America's Taj Mahal, a spiritual Disneyland. And how had Bhaktipada financed it? By accepting money from drug smugglers, by operating welfare and fund raising scams that would put the Mob to shame. To feed his insatiable hunger for money, Bhaktipada forced women to desert their children, go out on the road in dilapidated vans and beg for money, and bring him every nickel.

Bhaktipada broke up marriages and separated children from their parents. That's how he controlled people. That's what he had done to Bryant. He was convinced the guru had brainwashed his wife, Jane, who was in New Vrindaban, living with some other man. The guru had given her, like some housewarming present, to another devotee. Bryant's two little boys were with her, calling a stranger Daddy. The kids were surrounded by child abusers.

No wonder Bryant, who had lost forty pounds, was tottering on the edge of madness. Krishna had given him a mission. But deep down Bryant knew he would fail. He would never be able to kill Bhaktipada. The guru was isolated, surrounded by fanatics. Bryant would never get close enough even to try. Why had Krishna given Bryant a mission he couldn't fulfill? Why did Krishna tolerate all the chaos and corruption?

Bryant had spent months alone, cooped up in his jerry-built camper, cranking out an expose of the gurus on a dinky computer. He thought that if he exposed the gurus, devotees would see the truth and revolt. Instead they ignored him. So he had given the manuscript to the cops. The police had locked him up for carrying a gun and, unaccountably, had given his manuscript to the leaders of the New Vrindaban commune. There wasn't much else he could do.

He had tried - at least Bryant could tell himself that. The last time he had been in New Vrindaban, he had grabbed his two boys, thrown them in his camper and made a run for it. But he hadn't got far. Two vans full of men had chased him down, run him off the road and taken back his boys. But that seemed like a lifetime ago.

Again, Bryant tried to rid himself of all the anger, all the confusion. He replayed in his mind his last phone conversation with Jane. Her lilting English accent soothed him. It always did. Slowly, he started to chant: "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare."

Absorbed in the rhythmic mantra, Bryant did not hear the approaching footsteps. Had he noticed them, he might have saved his life. The police say that as he sat in the dark, a New Vrindaban hit man named Thomas Drescher tiptoed to the driver's side of the van, stuck a .45-caliber revolver through the window and pulled the trigger. Two bullets hit Bryant in the head. They entered the left side, smashed through his skull and sliced across his brain before exiting. Bryant slumped over the steering wheel. Seconds later two cars sped away.

Bryant was found the next morning. His brains had soaked into the seat, and a puddle of blood had drenched his shoes.

Word spread quickly among devotees throughout the world that Bryant was meant to be "a monkey on a stick." When a monkey breaks into a banana plantation in India, where the Krishna religion has its roots, the monkey is killed, impaled on a stick and left to rot outside the plantation. Other monkeys see him hanging there and stay out of the bananas. But the plan backfired. Bryant's murder turned a crank into a martyr, a spurned lover into a prophet.

"Steve told all kinds of incredible stories about what was going on up there," says Donald Bordenkircher, the sheriff of Marshall County, West Virginia, the site of New Vrindaban. "I kept saying, 'Steve, you've got to substantiate it. Give us names.' He'd say, 'I can't do that because they are in fear of their lives.' I considered him a disgruntled disciple who wanted to be a guru. Then he's killed, and one, two, three, he has instant credibility."

Bryant's death set off a series of overlapping investigations by federal, state and local law-enforcement authorities. It led to the conviction of two former Krishnas for the murder of another devotee and to the discovery of two more bodies buried in shallow graves in the New Vrindaban commune. Bryant's allegations of drug smuggling, child abuse and fraud have been corroborated by other devotees, who have been testifying before a grand jury in West Virginia. A task force of FBI and IRS agents, led by state and local police

officers, recently raided New Vrindaban and drove away three tractor-trailers full of alleged contraband. Now the investigations are spreading beyond New Vrindaban to Hare Krishna temples across the country and around the world.

"The last time I saw Bryant, he said something to me, and I said, 'Stephen, I don't have time to play games with a goddamn martyr'," Sheriff Bordenkircher says. "He looked at me and smiled and said, 'Now you understand.' And you know, he is a martyr. Maybe he's the Krishna Martin Luther."

As the moon hovered over the pine-crowned hills of West Virginia in June 1983, Charles St. Denis was in the Blue Boy Nursery, a business he ran as a cover for his small-time cocaine operation. It was 10:30 p.m., and St. Denis was coked up and tired. But when his friend Daniel Reid called to invite him over for more blow, St. Denis said sure. If there was one thing the 250-pound hedonist liked more than women, it was coke. He drove over to Reid's shack, a converted chicken coop on the northeast edge of New Vrindaban, parked his truck and walked around the back to the only door.

St. Denis knew the way and hadn't brought a flashlight. So he never saw Thomas Drescher and Daniel Reid step from the shadows and aim their .22-caliber pistols. Drescher, a Vietnam veteran who liked to brag about his combat escapades, emptied his gun. Reid froze.

"Shoot him," Drescher screamed. "Shoot him."

Reid began firing as St. Denis turned and ran. Drescher, smaller and quicker, easily caught and tackled St. Denis, who was bleeding from ten to twelve bullet wounds.

"Get a knife!" Drescher yelled at Reid. "Get a knife!" Then Drescher climbed onto St. Denis's heaving chest.

"Chant!" Drescher ordered. "Chant!"

Drescher thought he was doing the man he was murdering a favor. Like other good Krishnas, he believed St. Denis would get a better body in his next incarnation if he chanted God's name while he died.

But St. Denis wouldn't die. Gasping for breath, he kept struggling. Drescher became infuriated. When Reid returned with the knife, Drescher stabbed St. Denis again and again, harder and harder. Finally the blade snapped. Reid ran back to the shack and grabbed a screwdriver. Drescher stabbed St. Denis with that. But St. Denis was still breathing. Reid found a hammer, and Drescher hit St. Denis with it, punching a one-inch hole in his skull. St. Denis "kept moaning and groaning like a dog," Drescher told acquaintances who would later testify against him.

Drescher and Reid dragged St. Denis down a logging road to a grave Drescher had dug earlier that day. The site was hidden in swampy ground beside a small stream. In the dark, Drescher couldn't find it. Cursing, he and Reid stomped along the stream, looking for the grave. St. Denis kept moaning. Drescher stuffed plastic in his mouth. Slowly the breathing stopped.

Drescher watched St. Denis die and was about to help Reid look for the grave when he heard a splash. Reid had fallen into the three-foot hole. During the day, water had seeped in, filling the grave. Drescher and Reid wrapped St. Denis's body in plastic, weighted it with rocks, threw it in the hole and covered it with mud. A few days later water from the gurgling stream had formed a small pond over the grave.

Investigators say they don't know the motive for St. Denis's murder. St. Denis had argued with Drescher over a house Drescher had sold him. There was also secondhand testimony at the trial that St. Denis had raped Reid's wife. The West Virginia police say drugs may have been involved.

Whatever the motive, St. Denis's murder was no secret. The local police interviewed dozens of devotees and dragged several lakes on the Krishna estate. On several occasions, they used dogs in the search. Each time, the dogs returned to the small stream, which the Krishnas use to wash their laundry. Once the police dug only twelve feet away from the grave. All along they suspected Drescher but did not have enough evidence to arrest him. Chances are they never would have if Randall Gorby hadn't made a phone call.

Randall Gorby is a strange and shadowy character. A sixty-four-year-old retired steelworker, Gorby lived in Bethany, West Virginia, fifteen miles from New Vrindaban. The police describe him as an enigma, a radical and

"a real intellectual in the Aristotelian sense - self-educated." During a steel strike in the late Seventies, Gorby was a police informer, passing along information about the United Steel Workers to the West Virginia State Police. From the early Seventies on, Gorby was also the best friend the Krishnas had in West Virginia. Friends say he was attracted by their radicalism.

In the so-called West Virginia Glass Belt, where the pace of change is measured in generations and poverty is a way of life, the saffron-robed Krishnas might as well have been aliens from another planet. In 1969, when they moved onto an abandoned farm on McCreary's Ridge, seventy miles southwest of Pittsburgh, the Krishnas had no electricity, no heat, no running water. They survived the first winter because local people brought them food and clothing and feed for their animals. Farmers taught the Krishnas how to care for their livestock and how to milk the cows in their small herd.

But relations between the Krishnas and the local community soon soured. Residents of Moundsville, the small town nearest the commune, were angered when the Krishnas started panhandling. When they began going house to house seeking converts, the locals slammed their doors. When the Krishnas persisted, residents called the police. Local farmers, frightened by rumors that the Krishnas were spreading contagious diseases, like hepatitis, tried running their cars off the winding roads of the area. They shot up Krishna houses and burned their mobile homes.

Then word leaked that the Krishnas planned to build a spiritual Disneyland, seven temples on seven hills. Neighboring landowners signed a pact promising not to sell any property to the Krishnas. But the sect, which was attracting thousands of disenchanted middle-class youths from across the country, seemed to have unlimited amounts of money. And they had Randall Gorby, who was their straw man. Gorby bought land from farmers and miners hard hit by economic depression in the state. Then he quietly signed it over to the Krishnas. Soon, through the help of Gorby and others, the sect had amassed almost 3000 acres.

Over the years, Gorby became Bhaktipada's trusted confidant and a mentor to younger devotees like Drescher. Drescher and Gorby met after Gorby became upset that a Krishna was sleeping with his daughter-in-law and tried to break up the relationship. The Krishna, one of Bhaktipada's senior aides, asked Drescher to stop Gorby from interfering. Drescher drove over to

Gorby's house, but as one local cop says, "Gorby doesn't intimidate." Drescher loved that. Soon they were fast friends. The summer after he killed St. Denis, Drescher left his wife and two kids and moved into Gorby's house.

"It was a father-and-son-type thing," Drescher said in a three-hour telephone interview from prison.

Investigators say Drescher told Gorby that he had murdered St. Denis. They also say Drescher told Gorby that he had killed Bryant too and that officials at New Vrindaban had promised him \$20,000 for the hit. After the murder, the officials reneged.

"They're capitalists," one local investigator says. "If you're going to deal with them, you'd better get your money up front."

According to several investigators, Drescher asked Gorby to help him get the money. Gorby went to Bhaktipada, who told Gorby to have Drescher call Terry Sheldon, the president of the Cleveland temple and one of Bhaktipada's most trusted lieutenants. (Bhaktipada denies having any such conversation with Gorby.) Gorby passed the message along to Drescher.

Then Gorby got scared. He feared that he might become the next victim and perhaps that he had already become an accessory to murder. So he called his old friends from the steel strike, the West Virginia State Police, and told them Drescher was a murderer. They put a tap on Gorby's phone. It paid off a few days later when Drescher called to tell Gorby he was leaving the country.

The police traced the call and nabbed Drescher as he was leaving a restaurant in Kent, Ohio. Drescher's wife and four-year-old son were with him, and so was Terry Sheldon. Drescher's Isuzu Trooper was packed with clothes, kitchen utensils and camping equipment. He had \$4000 in his wallet. He was also carrying a diary that included Bryant's Berkeley, California, address, a description of Bryant's van, the license number of the van and detailed accounts of Bryant's recent travels around Los Angeles. Sheldon was carrying an unsigned letter that said that if the police were ever tracking Drescher, he should be taken to New York and put on a plane to India.

Two days after Drescher's arrest, Gorby woke up in his second-floor bedroom. A chain smoker, he needed a nicotine fix and immediately lit a

cigarette. The house exploded, blowing him through the roof. Gorby flew over the house, watching splinters of lumber and shards of glass sail past. He then fell back through the roof, crashed through the second floor and fell into the living room. Beams collapsed around him, and a flash fire scorched him, tattooing patterns on his skin.

Amazingly, Gorby survived. He was rushed to a hospital in Wheeling, where for weeks he remained in critical condition with second- and third-degree burns. The state police called in the FBI, which concluded that the explosion was caused by a leak in the gas lines of Gorby's house. A valve had been unscrewed, allowing gas to seep into the house. The cops think Drescher might know something about it because he had helped Gorby install the gas line.

Today Gorby is out of the hospital and in hiding, in the federal witness-protection program. Thanks in part to Gorby's testimony, Drescher was convicted last December of first-degree murder in the St. Denis killing and was sentenced to life imprisonment. The trial lasted four days. A week later, in a separate trial, Daniel Reid pleaded guilty. He led the police to the body. Reid is in a West Virginia county jail. Drescher is in the West Virginia State Penitentiary awaiting extradition to California. He still claims he didn't kill St. Denis. He also insists he had nothing to do with the explosion at Gorby's house.

"Who am I, Lex Luthor, that I can blow somebody up from the county jail?" Drescher asks. "Gorby was cheating the gas company. He told me and a couple of people in the Krishna community he was bypassing his meter. He screwed up and didn't tighten the fittings down."

Drescher admits he tailed Steve Bryant but swears he didn't kill him. "The Krishnas aren't idiots," Drescher says. "You think they wouldn't know that if this guy {Bryant} ended up killed, people would point the finger at them? I'm not going to get into the good graces of the Krishnas by embroiling them in the most scandalous controversy they've ever faced. So what's my motive?"

Investigators think Drescher's motive for killing Bryant was the same as it was for killing St. Denis - Kirtanananda Swami Bhaktipada, the New Vrindaban guru, wanted both men dead. "Drescher was an enforcer," says

one investigator. "He would never have killed St. Denis or Bryant if the guru hadn't wanted it done."

Bhaktipada denies any connection with the Bryant or St. Denis murders. He dismisses Bryant as a spurned lover seeking revenge against his wife's benefactors. The guru asserts that Bryant's murder was probably Gorby's fault. "Gorby was always trying to incite everybody to do something," says Bhaktipada. Once, the guru recalls, Gorby warned a senior aide that "you've got to do something, this guy's got to be killed." The aide threw Gorby out.

Bhaktipada claims that he never approved any payments to Drescher. He says he abhors violence. He derides the investigations of the Krishna church as the latter-day equivalent of the nineteenth-century persecution of utopian societies. The probes, he says, are an outgrowth of the inevitable antagonism between materialist Americans and spiritual Krishnas.

"We're eternally at loggerheads," the guru says.

That Steve Bryant was considered so dangerous he had to be killed is a measure of the paranoia that wracks the Hare Krishna movement. Until two bullets ended Bryant's life, most people didn't consider him worth listening to, let alone killing.

The son of a career officer, Bryant was a typical army brat, living on bases around the world until he was eleven. Then his father retired and moved to Detroit to become a high-school mathematics teacher. Steve was an aimless, unhappy kid. His only extracurricular activity in high school was drugs. After graduation, he enrolled in a junior college but dropped out after the first semester. He laid carpet and did drugs, worked in construction and did drugs. He flirted with studying to be a masseur. Then in 1972 a Hare Krishna stopped him on the street and invited him to visit the ISKCON temple in Detroit. He went to lunch the next Sunday and was hooked.

"He told us he'd found the religion he'd been looking for," Steve's father, Jack Bryant, recalls. "We didn't see what he saw in it. But he was twenty, a grown man, and we had no influence over his choice. He preached to us and tried to convert us. We got into arguments, mostly about meat. Don't eat meat, that was the big thing."

Across the country, thousands of youths were embracing the same message in one of the true religious revolutions of this century. It began in 1965, when an Indian guru, a retired pharmaceuticals executive named A.C. Bhaktivedanta and known as Swami Prabhupada, arrived in New York City and rented a dilapidated loft on the Bowery. Prabhupada didn't have a grand plan or detailed system; he simply began chanting and preaching on street corners, giving lectures out of a storefront, a curio shop called Matchless Gifts. His message was enticingly simple: by chanting Krishna's name hundreds of times a day and devoting one's labor to him, by eating no meat and living a pure life that included abstention from sex except for procreation, ordinary people could transcend material life and merge with God. When he died in 1977, at eighty-one, Prabhupada left behind a movement that had millions of followers in hundreds of temples all over the world.

"The fact that there is now in the West a vigorous, disciplined, and seemingly well organized [religious] movement - not merely a philosophical movement or a yoga or meditation movement...is a stunning accomplishment," wrote Harvey Cox, a professor of divinity at Harvard University, in his 1983 book *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna*. "When I say [Prabhupada was] 'one in a million', I think that is in some ways an underestimate. Perhaps he was one in a hundred million."

But Prabhupada's death led to an internecine war that has all but destroyed his legacy. He left few, if any, instructions on who should succeed him or how the Krishna church should be run. As a result, eleven gurus divided up the world like Mafia chieftains. Each became the godfather in his territory.

"The eleven members of the guru club started building their own empires," says Atreya Rishi, a graduate of Harvard Business School who is a former president of the Berkeley temple and a member of the Governing Body commission (GBC), the board of directors that in theory controls ISKCON. "They used their power to strengthen themselves instead of the movement. What was once a religion degenerated into a bunch of cults."

Soon the temples were at each other's throats. Their gurus disagreed on pivotal questions of doctrine and theory.

They competed for members and money. Membership began to decline as devotees, disenchanted by the factionalism, left the organized Krishna

church. ISKCON still claims to have 1 million members in the United States and another 2 million around the world. But experts note that this roster includes names on mailing lists and temple guest registers. Hard-core membership remains at about 10,000. One statistic, more than any other, shows how badly guru mismanagement has hurt the movement. According to *Hinduism Today*, an independent newspaper, only 500 of the 4000 devotees initiated by Prabhupada are still in ISKCON. Many of the disillusioned remain devout. The religion is pure, they insist. It is the gurus who are corrupt.

Even the Governing Body Commission, which is dominated by the gurus and works hard to protect them, has come to that conclusion. In the last six years, it has excommunicated six of the eleven gurus. Bhavananda (Charles Baces), the Australian guru, was drummed out last year after being accused of homosexuality. Ramesvar (Robert Grant), the L.A. guru, was also kicked out last year because he seduced a teenage girl. Bhagavan (William Ehrlichman), the European guru, left his temple after he was discovered to be conducting a relationship with a woman despite a vow of chastity. Last December a GBC committee asked Bhaktipada to resign from the commission, according to Atreya Rishi, "because of his abuse of the philosophy and all his legal problems."

The Berkeley guru, Hansadutta, a.k.a. Hans Kary, a.k.a. Jack London, was booted out in 1983 because of his involvement with guns and drugs. One night, in a very black mood, Hansadutta shot up a liquor store and a Cadillac dealership in Berkeley. While he was still a guru, Hansadutta recorded several albums with songs such as "Guru, Guru, on the Wall" (I once saw a guru just like you/New York Jew/Nothing new").

But the most bizarre guru was in London. In 1982, Jayatirtha (James Immel) was the first guru to be thrown out of ISKCON. Until then, Jayatirtha was considered unusually pure. His devotees worshiped him for his special relationship with Krishna. Often they sat at his feet, watching what they thought were spiritual journeys highlighted by direct conversations with Krishna. But these spiritual journeys were chemically fueled. The guru was an acid freak. While most of his followers lived in squalor, Jayatirtha and a select inner circle lived high in both senses of the word.

Steve Bryant lived in the London temple on and off for three years, from 1977 to 1980. A true believer, he managed to ignore the sex-and-drugs cult

at the heart of the temple. He thought the movement was chaste because he so badly wanted it to be.

"Sulocana [Bryant's Krishna name, pronounced 'Su-low-chan'] was kind of innocent, kind of naive," says Yuvati Matusow, a close friend of Bryant's who was in the London temple at the same time. "He was really into the scriptures and worshipping the deities and was pretty oblivious to everything else. People used to make fun of him."

Bryant was lonely. He wanted to get married, not only within the faith but to a woman who, like him, had been initiated by the founder. The reason was that in Vedic culture, women must defer to men. A husband acts as his wife's spiritual master. If both spouses are initiated by the same guru, there is harmony, a clear line of authority. The guru tells the husband what to do, and he tells his wife. But if husband and wife have been initiated by different gurus, conflict is inherent. Inevitably the two gurus will give contrary advice. Further, the wife's guru undermines the husband's authority by assuming his spiritual role.

The problem was most of the women Prabhupada had initiated were already taken. So Bryant took on an eager novice who had been recommended by mutual friends. The woman was Jane Rangle, a twenty-year-old English woman whose boyfriend had just left her and their two-year-old son. Bryant wanted to gain a disciple almost as much as a wife, and Jane wanted to be a disciple.

"Friends asked me if I'd like to get married to Steve Bryant," Jane says. "I'd never met him, and when I did, I didn't like him. I didn't think liking him was important. I'd had a relationship before where I liked the person, and it didn't work out. I thought it would be a good opportunity to become a devotee. I felt I needed somebody to guide me."

Two weeks after they met in May 1979, the couple got married in a civil ceremony. The newlyweds had a two-year-old boy to support and not many friends. They had few skills and less money. To survive, they moved to Newcastle-upon-Tyne, working there in a broken-down, Krishna-owned incense factory. As soon as they had saved enough money, Bryant packed Jane and her son off to New Vrindaban.

"He was fond of the guru there [New Vrindaban] for a long time," his father recalls. "For a long time, he said that guru was the best of the eleven."

Bryant had a scheme. He bought a load of tape recorders and cameras and flew to India. There he sold the equipment, using the cash to buy cheap costume jewelry and paintings of Krishna deities. He returned to New Vrindaban and taught Jane how to make pendants, which he sold to devotees.

"He thought he was going to make a lot of money, but it didn't work out," Jane says. "His schemes hardly ever worked out. He was forever getting an idea, becoming completely fanatical about it and then letting it fizzle out."

But Bryant wasn't discouraged. A city boy, he loved the steep mountains and the deep forests that surrounded New Vrindaban. He thought he had a future in the 700-member commune. Bhaktipada had promised to make him the manager of the sect's hotel. Bryant believed he was about to become important, a senior aide to Bhaktipada.

Kirtanananda Swami Bhaktipada was born Keith Ham, the son of a Baptist minister in Peekskill, New York. A graduate student in the history of religion at Columbia University, Ham discovered Prabhupada on the Lower East Side of New York City and became one of the founder's first disciples. Since then, Bhaktipada has always claimed that he, and he alone, is the founder's true heir.

Bhaktipada conceived of the ornate Palace of Gold in West Virginia as Prabhupada's home away from home. It quickly became an obsession. Contrary to Prabhupada's teachings of simple living and high thoughts, Bhaktipada equated opulence with devotion. The domed roof and outside walls are coated with twenty-two-carat gold leaf, which shimmers in the afternoon sun. The palace boasts 200 tons of marble, imported from Italy and Canada, and stained-glass windows made from thousands of pieces of hand-shaped glass. The baseboards are gold, and gold-embroidered silken brocades hang from the walls. The entire palace, which Bhaktipada likes to call America's Taj Mahal, was built without blueprints by young devotees using do-it-yourself books.

The energy and money Bhaktipada lavished on the palace did not diminish after the death of the founder. It became a symbol of Bhaktipada's authority and still serves as tangible proof that he is the only true guru on the planet.

The other gurus and their followers, Bhaktipada claims, are "in maya," living in sin.

For a year, Bryant and Jane lived like serfs in the shadow of the castle. Their apartment was a windowless basement in a friend's house. They had to insulate the dank walls with cardboard. Bryant and Jane made jewelry. Bryant also helped craft stained glass for the Palace of Gold. He was becoming increasingly bitter at the delay in his appointment as hotel manager. Jane kept house, but it was never clean enough for Bryant.

Bryant was an imperious husband who rode his wife unmercifully. He thought nothing of loading Jane, his stepson and his two baby boys into a van on the spur of the moment and moving cross-country. The thing Bryant liked best about Jane was he could dominate her. She says he beat her. He kept the pressure on, reminding his wife again and again she was his devotee. Therefore she had to do whatever he said.

When Bryant didn't get the hotel job, he went into a funk, mumbling that he wasn't appreciated. He began drinking and doing drugs. He stopped chanting and participating in daily devotional services. Finally, overcome with impatience, he fled back to India, leaving Jane and the children in New Vrindaban. It was a fateful decision.

Broke and alone with three small children, Jane decided the only man she could depend upon was Bhaktipada. He was paying her rent and giving her food. The guru kept telling her that he was the eternal man in her life, that her relationship with her husband was temporary and mundane. In her first independent act since her marriage, Jane asked Bhaktipada to initiate her. He agreed without seeking Bryant's approval, a violation of Krishna procedure.

When Bryant returned from India, he was furious. Jane no longer needed him. She had Bhaktipada. Eventually he badgered her into traveling to Redding, California, where they moved in with the couple who had introduced them in England. Jane was miserable. She missed Bhaktipada, New Vrindaban, her friends, the Krishna school the kids attended. After a year, Bryant agreed to return.

"Steve knew he could never have a relationship with Jane unless he went back," a friend says. "Jane was fixated on Bhaktipada. He'd brainwashed her."

Bryant stayed in New Vrindaban for eight unhappy months before flying off to India once again to buy jewelry and paintings. When he came back five months later, he immediately started making plans to go to Mexico. Supported by Bhaktipada, Jane refused to accompany him. She wanted to stay in New Vrindaban. And she wanted a divorce.

"I was tired of traveling and didn't really have any affection for Sulocana," Jane said in a recent interview at New Vrindaban, where she still lives. "I asked Bhaktipada if I could stay, and he said yes. Sulocana got really mad. He argued with Bhaktipada and started criticizing the community, saying, 'This place is just a tourist business to make money. There's no spiritual qualities left at all.' He was really devastated. I think he realized he was losing his only disciple."

Bryant still had his two sons, or so he thought. While Jane was sleeping one night, he packed his belongings, loaded his children into the camper and made his abortive attempt to flee with them.

After the kids were seized by Bhaktipada's devotees, Bryant continued on alone. He cursed Jane for leaving him. But chiefly he cursed Bhaktipada. It was his fault. The guru had turned Jane against him. Bhaktipada had split them up because he couldn't control Bryant. He wanted his followers to be sheep.

Disconsolate, Bryant traveled around the country. He kept calling Jane, trying to convince her that Bhaktipada was evil. In some other conversations, though, he changed his tune, promising to reform, to return to the Krishna fold and become a devoted husband.

"I'll change, I'll change, you know I'll change," he says on a tape he made of one phone call to her. When that didn't work, he tried blackmail, threatening to "destroy New Vrindaban by media exposure."

One night, at 3:00 a.m., in Dallas, a frantic Bryant called Bhaktipada to confront him. He taped that conversation too.

"I have the only eternal relationship with her," the guru says. "There's only one thing you can do."

"What?" asks Bryant.

"You'll have to surrender to me," says the guru.

Bryant refuses. He says he cannot allow his sons to stay in New Vrindaban.

"All right, we'll fight for it," says the guru.

"You want to just go through with a fight, huh?" Bryant asks.

"Yeah!" says the guru.

Bryant decided to launch a two-pronged attack on Bhaktipada. First he would search Prabhupada's writings to show that Bhaktipada was a false prophet, that he had no right to initiate Jane without permission. Then he would interview alienated New Vrindaban devotees and collect evidence of the illegal activities of the commune. He would put everything in a book and circulate it throughout ISKCON. If that didn't force Bhaktipada to resign, Bryant would go public.

Bryant started in L.A., where a disaffected devotee gave him microfilm copies of 7000 of Prabhupada's letters. Reading through them, Bryant found his smoking gun. The founder did not trust the gurus who succeeded him. Most of all, he did not trust Bhaktipada. Prabhupada called Bhaktipada envious and said there would be nothing to lament if a thousand Bhaktipadas came and went.

Suddenly Bryant understood why Krishna had allowed Bhaktipada to break up his marriage. Krishna had given him a mission. He would expose all the bogus gurus - not just Bhaktipada but all those who had soiled the Krishna church. He would lead a revolution that would overthrow the gurus, purify the church and return it to the teachings of the founder. The penalty for false preaching was death. The gurus had to die.

In a state of ecstasy, Bryant bought a \$495 Commodore computer and began to work on his manuscript. As soon as he finished one chapter, he boldly sent it to Bhaktipada. Then he called the commune, demanding that the swami debate him. Bhaktipada's lieutenants ignored his challenges. But Bryant did begin getting threats on his life.

The death threats only convinced him that he was striking a nerve. For the first time, somebody was taking him seriously. In September 1985, Bryant took his one-man crusade to the headquarters of the infidel. He called Sheriff Bordenkircher to ask if he could be placed in protective custody in the Moundsville jail. The sheriff, who recorded the conversation, asked him if he really believed his life was in danger.

"Without a doubt!" Bryant says with pride in his voice. "I've been living in a motor home for the last year, since Keith Ham would kill me in a second if he saw me."

Bryant spent a week in the jail, making phone calls to the press and demanding that the GBC, which was having its annual convention at New Vrindaban, expel Bhaktipada. Once again he was ignored. A month later, in October 1985, Bhaktipada was overseeing the construction of a brick road at New Vrindaban when Michael Shockman, a thirty-two-year-old devotee from North Dakota, sneaked up from behind and brained him with a three-foot steel pipe. Bhaktipada collapsed. He was rushed to a Pittsburgh hospital, where brain surgery was performed immediately. He remained in critical condition for weeks and has never fully recovered. The guru still needs two canes to walk and suffers from severe headaches. He is prone to memory lapses and is always accompanied by two attack-trained German shepherds.

Sheriff Bordenkircher arrested Shockman. A few days later Bryant called the sheriff to say, "Shockman shouldn't be in jail. He should be given a medal." Bryant and Shockman had never met. But to the devotees in New Vrindaban, the call was proof they were co-conspirators. After that, according to the sheriff, paranoia swept through the tightly knit commune. Once Bhaktipada was released from the hospital, he cleaned house, demoting senior aides who had previously possessed the authority to check his wilder impulses.

"New Vrindaban definitely thinks Sulocana's writings were responsible for Shockman attacking Bhaktipada," says a Los Angeles devotee who has friends in the West Virginia commune. "A lot of us outsiders do too."

Convinced that Bhaktipada was ready to fall, Bryant went back to New Vrindaban one more time. In February 1986, Jane's new husband, who had been selected by Bhaktipada, called Sheriff Bordenkircher and told him Bryant had returned and was threatening to storm New Vrindaban with a band of Rambos and blow away the leaders of the commune. But when the

sheriff found Bryant a few hours later, he was holed up in a cheap apartment five miles south of town, alone except for his.45 and LSD. He was arrested for carrying the gun and jailed.

"The first time Bryant was here, he's in fear of his life and screaming for protective custody," Sheriff Bordenkircher recalls. "The second time he's a new guy. He's full of bravado. He's got a gun. It's loaded, and he says he's got people helping him. He's now the hunter, not the hunted."

It was an act. Steve Bryant was alone. His swagger was a cover for growing despair and bone-rattling fear. He was in over his head, and he knew it.

"Sulocana knew they were going to get him, he knew it was just a question of time," says a close friend. "That's why he had a gun and was always on the run, driving here, driving there. He always said, 'They'll kill me, and they'll do it through the agency of Tirtha {Drescher}.'"

A month after his arrest Bryant was released and immediately left for Michigan to visit his parents. It was their final meeting. "The last time he was home, he said, 'I think they might know I'm here,'" Bryant's mother, Helga, recalls. "He said, 'I'd better get going, or you'll be in danger.'"

Bryant was right. Drescher was down the block, tailing him. And Drescher says Randall Gorby was with him.

"After Bryant was released, Gorby came to my house and wanted me to go to Detroit with him and take some pictures of Bryant's parents' house," Drescher says. "I drove Gorby up there. He had a camera and took some pictures of the scene. We took a Snoopy bumper sticker and put it on Bryant's van."

With Drescher stalking him, Bryant had as much chance as a rat in a rattlesnake's cage. Bryant drove back to California, and several investigators think Drescher followed him. Drescher admits to taking two trips to California to tail him. Once, he says, he flew to L.A., rented a car and drove up to Berkeley, where Bryant was living in a small apartment. A few days before Bryant's murder Drescher flew back to L.A.

"Gorby gave me something like \$4000 to go to Detroit and to California two different times," Drescher says. "I was supposed to watch Bryant, to see

where he went, what his contacts were, what he did net. I flew back east a couple of days before he was killed. My alibi is I was with the Krishnas at a festival in Columbus, Ohio, the day somebody killed Bryant."

The police in West Virginia say they have witnesses who will testify that Drescher told them he killed Bryant. One of them is Randall Gorby. Another is a former treasurer of New Vrindaban named Paul Ferry, who used to be married to Bryant's friend Yuvati Matusow.

"After I found out about the murder," Matusow recalls, "I called my former husband and said, 'So you guys finally got around to killing Sulocana.'"

"My ex-husband said, 'Oh, Sulocana is dead?'"

"'Yeah,' I said. 'Tirtha came out here and shot him twice in the head.'"

"'I saw Tirtha a couple of weeks ago on the farm, and he told me that he was going to do that,' my husband said. 'He said he was going to go out to California and kill Sulocana.'"

What role, if any, Randall Gorby played in tracking down Bryant remains uncertain. Gorby declined requests for an interview. What seems clear is that Terry Sheldon, the Cleveland temple president who was arrested with Drescher, was in charge of the entire operation.

Sheldon took several trips to the West Coast. On one trip, Krishna sources say Sheldon offered a former member of the L.A. temple a contract to kill Bryant. The ex-Krishna refused it. Sheldon may also have solicited other help from within the L.A. temple. A few days before Bryant was killed, a member of the temple's security force was asking questions about Bryant's whereabouts. And the night Bryant was killed, two cars sped away from the murder scene.

"There were definitely people from Watseka Avenue {the site of the L.A. temple} watching Sulocan," says a temple member. "I heard they were on the scene and were communicating by walkie-talkie."

"A second car at the scene is now under investigation," says Sterling Norris, the Los Angeles County assistant district attorney who will prosecute Drescher.

When he was picked up with Drescher in Kent, Ohio, Sheldon was carrying a hooked-blade linoleum knife. The police charged him with carrying a concealed weapon and held him for three days, then released him. Sheldon immediately disappeared. He surfaced first in London, where he worked in the kitchen of a vegetarian restaurant owned by the Krishnas. Then, using an alias, he went to small temple in Northern Ireland, where he was recognized by a devotee who had seen his picture *The ISKCON World Review*, the Krishna newspaper.

"I confronted him, and he admitted he was Tapapunja {Sheldon} from New Vrindaban," says Peter Brinkman, the president of the Northern Ireland temple. "I asked him why he wasn't using his real name and said this must be in relation to the killing of Sulocana. He admitted he was involved. He said, 'I engineered it.'"

"I was completely shocked," Brinkman continues. "I asked, 'How can you guys take the law into your own hands?' He said, 'Well, he was an offender.' I said, 'You'd better leave. I don't want anything to do with you guys from New Vrindaban.' Sheldon flew to Bombay, apparently went on to Australia and is now thought to be in Ghana."

STEVE BRYANT'S MURDER HAS SPARKED investigations not only into his killing but also into New Vrindaban and the entire Krishna church. The state police are looking into allegations of widespread child abuse. State and federal authorities are investigating charges that the construction of the Palace of Gold was financed in part by trafficking in illegal drugs.

Federal and local investigators say there is evidence of at least two drug operations. One ring manufactured Quaalude-like drugs. The Marshall County Sheriff's Office says Drescher was involved, noting that Drescher had been arrested and convicted in 1979 of running a Quaalude factory in Columbus, Ohio. He was sentenced to nineteen months in prison and served a year.

A much larger and more lucrative drug operation, federal and local investigators say, was headed by Emil Sofsky, known as Adwaita, who smuggled cocaine from Colombia and hashish oil from Afghanistan. Based in New York, Sofsky periodically showed up at New Vrindaban carrying briefcases filled with cash, which he turned over to Bhaktipada, according to

local investigators. The hash oil, the police say, was hidden in hollowed-out briquettes of incense. The cocaine was clandestinely transported in shipments of scarves. Sofsky has fled and is currently being sought by U.S. marshals. "Adwaita was running a drug operation, it was a known fact {at New Vrindaban}," says Yuvati Matusow. "Everybody knew he was a drug dealer and was bringing the money to Bhaktipada. He was always running from the police."

Bhaktipada denies the charges. He says the construction of the Palace of Gold was funded entirely through voluntary donations from a worldwide network of supporters, as well as by panhandling and selling candles, incense and literature in airports.

"I find that very hard to believe," says one federal investigator who has studied the group's finances. "If you could raise that kind of money by panhandling, the Red Cross and the American Cancer Society would be out there mugging people."

Sergeant Thomas Westfall of the Marshall County Sheriff's Office says a slew of allegations of child neglect and child abuse at New Vrindaban are being probed. Several parents have claimed that church officials, in effect, kidnapped their children. At New Vrindaban, children are separated at the age of five from their parents. The children are required to live year-round in separate boys' and girls' boarding schools, sometimes called ashrams, on the estate. If the parents are "good," they are allowed a visit on Sunday afternoons. But if they are "bad," visits are barred. The children return home for four one-week vacations during the year.

"Recently a friend of mine went to Bhaktipada to ask if her five-year-old son could sleep at home instead of in the boys' ashram, where the atmosphere is very harsh," says Susan Hebel, a mother of four who lived at the commune from 1978 until last year. "Bhaktipada said, 'No. If you don't like it, leave, and I'll get your husband another wife.' That's always the pattern. He has a very low regard for the institution of marriage. He wants everyone to give up family life and just work hard to build the community."

In the summer of 1984, Charles St. Denis's five-year-old son and Daniel Reid's six-year-old son were found suffocated in an old refrigerator. A dead bunny was lodged between them. Last November, almost six months to the day after his father was murdered, Steve Bryant's three-year-old son

drowned in a lake. Investigators say there is nothing at this point but coincidence to link the children's deaths.

"The deaths are typical of the neglect of children that goes on up there," says one investigator. "It's criminal. They leave kids alone all day long, or they'll put a ten-year-old or a pregnant girl in charge of them."

Child abuse and child molestation are also rampant in the boys' ashram, according to parents and the police. In a complaint filed with the Marshall County Sheriff's Office, Susan Hebel charged that over a three-year period, Larry Gardner, the headmaster of the school (known as the *guru kula*), and Frederick DiFrancisco, his assistant, molested her thirteen-year-old son on dozens of occasions. Hebel went to the police with her complaint after she told Bhaktipada what had happened and the guru refused to do anything.

"When I found out about it, I went to Bhaktipada and told him that people I've had trust in all these years had molested my child, and I started to cry," Hebel says. "He said, 'You stupid woman! Sex is sex. How much sex have you had?'"

"He didn't see the difference between two consenting adults who are married and a child and a teacher," Hebel continues. "Later I found out he was planning to send Sri Galim {Gardner} to India to open another school. That really freaked me out."

(At press time, DiFrancisco had been arrested. Gardner, according to investigators, had fled, either to his home state of Texas or to India. Bhaktipada says he is unaware of Gardner's whereabouts.)

Bhaktipada denounces the child-abuse investigation as "harassment and persecution" and an attempt to pressure devotees into rebelling against their swami. He claims that Hebel is seeking revenge, trying to crucify him because he kicked her out of New Vrindaban for "immorality. She was more or less a prostitute." As soon as she told him that her son had been abused, Bhaktipada said he intervened, arranging for the two teachers to receive counseling. He also "gave" one of them "a new wife."

Bryant's charges about women being badly mistreated at New Vrindaban have also been corroborated. Most of the cases involve husbands beating wives, with Bhaktipada's approval.

"I got married a second time because Bhaktipada told me to," says one female ex-devotee. "My second husband was mentally and physically abusive, becoming violent when I wouldn't have sex and throwing me around the room. I told Bhaktipada, and he said, 'You just tolerate it.'"

To Bhaktipada, women were apparently little more than objects he could use to control male Krishnas. Before granting female devotees their weekly audience with him, he would, according to one former resident, "make comments like 'Get out the incense, boys, it's fish night.'"

An investigator elaborates on violence against women in the commune: "We've got fifty instances where women were beaten, and the guru's advice to them was always the same - 'Be submissive.'"

If life for women was hell in New Vrindaban, it was worse when they were on the road performing *sankirtan* - panhandling, distributing literature and spreading the faith. According to Hebel, the women were given weekly quotas. If they didn't meet them or if they broke some minor rule, they were beaten, often with a rubber hose.

Instead of working airports for handouts and converts, once a common practice, many Krishnas now pursue other scams. For example, women devotees often identify themselves as schoolteachers collecting for an orphanage in West Virginia. The school is registered, but as one former devotee says, "If there are any orphans there, it is because Bhaktipada broke up the family."

During the pope's visit in 1979, some Krishna women represented themselves as members of the Catholic Youth Organization. And on Labor Day weekends, when the Jerry Lewis Telethon airs, they pretend to be collecting for muscular dystrophy. In return for some donations, devotees have been giving away counterfeit Snoopy bumper stickers as well as NFL and NCAA football emblems.

"We're the chosen of God," says one former Krishna official. "The rest of the people out there are Karmies {sinners}. If we don't take their money, they'll just use it for sense gratification. By taking their money any way possible, we're doing them a favor."

Several Krishnas say that while they were on the road fund raising, they supported themselves by shoplifting and stealing. That was only right. Everything belongs to Krishna. So everything belongs to them.

Last January, a fifty-member task force composed of representatives of the FBI, the IRS and the West Virginia state and local police raided New Vrindaban, seizing records and alleged contraband. The raid grew out of a grand-jury investigation in Elkins, West Virginia, that last summer began looking into activities at the commune. A new grand jury will soon take up the trail. More raids are coming. So are more arrests.

"In the next twelve months, we're going to take a couple of high people at New Vrindaban down on conspiracy-to-murder charges," says one investigator. "We're very hopeful of getting Bhaktipada."

If he does land in jail, Bhaktipada says it will be Krishna's will. "I love it," he said in a telephone interview during a national speaking tour. "I'm using what is materially unfavorable circumstances for God's service. Then it becomes favorable. When we preach God's message, everything becomes perfect."

"It's like Christ being put on the cross," says Atreya Rishi, the former president of the Berkeley temple. "Even if Bhaktipada is put in jail, he will come out victorious because he's a martyr. The difference is, he's a martyr to a lie, and Steve Bryant is a martyr to the truth."